

## Memory and gender in the music of Jun Togawa

Asa Roast

*This is an edited version of an essay I wrote for a class in October 2010. It appears here in slightly updated and better-referenced form. Jun Togawa (b. 1961) is a Japanese musician and singer working on the avant garde fringe of mainstream pop.*



The most popular attention Jun Togawa ever received in Japan was for a few months in 1982, when she fronted an advertising campaign for TOTO Washlet bidets.

*VIDEO: Jun Togawa's TOTO bidet advert*

These adverts are typical of contemporary Japanese advertising in the way they portray young women as feminised, infantilised and 'cute' mascots for products – the archetypal *kawaii shōjo* ('cute girl'). This kind of presentation of women as commercialised, infantilised and sexualised at the same time became increasingly common in the 1980s with the rise of the celebrity industry of the *aidoru* ('Pop Idol').

On the face of it, her career was typical of a minor *aidoru* - she produced a number of albums in the '80s and '90s, appeared on light entertainment programmes singing her songs, acted for TV and film, and dabbled in advertising from time-to-time. In fact, it seems likely that Jun Togawa never intended to follow a typical *aidoru* career, instead modelling herself as a conscious parody of the *aidoru* stereotype that dominated popular media and music in Japan. The cult following she's gained have long argued that Togawa has used her minor celebrity status as a platform from which to produce a challenging musical subversion of the commercial *aidoru* pop which dominated popular Japanese music. If you look at the type of music Togawa was producing in the mid-80s, it's radically different from typical *aidoru* pop.

To illustrate this dislocation, let's compare Togawa's bidet advert to a live performance from the mid-80s:

*VIDEO: YAPOOS live 1985-6 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uxpylXf5fQ>*

Togawa's albums are stunning in their diversity and originality, combining extremely adept pop songwriting with an immense range of styles, including New Wave Punk, parodies of mainstream J-Pop, Avant Garde 'Electro-Cabaret', and frequent collaborations with surrealist composers, most notably Koji Ueno in *Guernica*. The emotions her music inspires actively attack and undermine the

sentimental romance of *aidoru* pop - her vocals are simultaneously damaged, vulnerable, distorted, aggressive, deluded and naive. Because of the radical dislocation between her music and the mainstream currents of Japanese pop, and for the self-indulgent reason that I'm a huge fan of her work, I have chosen to look in detail at what Jun Togawa's music can tell us about the structures of *aidoru* culture and Japanese popular consciousness in general. Particularly, I'm interested in examining how her music subverts dominant narratives in popular culture and society as a whole in two key areas: national memory and gender. The techniques that Togawa uses to subvert and destabilise these narratives fall into two broad fields (which overlap one another considerably, as will become obvious): hauntology and *détournement*.

### **Guernica and Hauntology**

Jun Togawa's musical career began with the Punk and Post-Punk scenes that emerged in Tokyo in the late '70s, singing in the band Halmens whilst she was still a teenager. The music of Halmens is bitter, dark, New Wave strongly reminiscent of contemporary Anglo-American bands, and it's subversive power as an alternative to 'mainstream' Japanese popular culture is perhaps limited by it's close emulation of foreign music.

*VIDEO: Guernica 1980*

From 1981, however, Togawa embarked on a far more idiosyncratic and challenging musical project with Koji Ueno which spoke specifically about Japanese popular culture. This was the 'Electro-Cabaret' band Guernica, and their subversion of hegemonic Japanese narratives of memory and nationality.





Musically, Guernica evoked a hybrid imagined world of early Showa Japan and 1930s German cabaret. Guernica's visual presence rested upon this imagined historicity. On stage they dressed in historically accurate costume, for the '40s with Togawa frequently modelling her appearance on that of Hibari Misora, the classic proto-*aidoru* of the post-war years: beaming, elegant and highly feminised. Guernica's album covers show smiling couples gazing blissfully into blue skies, backed by modernist images of industry and progress in a conscious emulation of wartime propaganda. Similarly, in many of their performances Guernica appeared in military khakis, evoking more troubling and ambiguous memories of wartime than the kitsch nostalgic aesthetic that otherwise dominated.

Their songs were typically sentimental ballads in the *enka* and *ryūkōka* styles that were popular in the '30s and '40s, often imitating the musical traits of early stars such as Akiko Futaba and Noriko Awaya. The fact that these genres remained extremely popular in contemporary Japanese music allows us to read Togawa's adaptation of these musics as a commentary on the conservatism and saccharine nostalgia of popular culture in Japan. Historically, these genres had consciously incorporated broad Western musical styles such as Tango and Big Band Jazz, but Guernica's music particularly sought to evoke the spirit of an imagined world of inter-war German musical theatre that was decadent, avant garde, experimental and fiercely modernist. Thus, many of Guernica's songs were angular, abrasive compositions which closely emulate the music of *The Threepenny Opera* and similar examples of German musical theatre.

However, this relatively faithful adaptation of nostalgic music was combined with an instrumentation that relied heavily on electronic synthesisers, drum machines and electronically processed sounds which evoked contemporary pop music and experimental electronica. This act of recalling the past in a subverted, quasi-modernised format moves Guernica's music beyond the simply nostalgic, into the radical terrain of the 'hauntological'.

This is illustrated perfectly by the opening two tracks of their debut LP *Kaizou eno Yakudou*

(Throbbing to the Alteration. *Bremen* is a sinister, abrasive cabaret piece in which Togawa's voice wavers and trills above a stark piano line. The song finishes abruptly, with Togawa's uneasy vocals suspended without resolution, before they are engulfed in a wave of synthesisers. *Cafe Psycho* is a sublime marriage of dark synth pop and syrupy *ryūkōka* that summons up images of a seething modernist landscape of progress and industry.

VIDEO: *Guernica – Bremen*

VIDEO: *Guernica – Cafe de Psycho*

Derrida (1994, p.63) coined the term 'hauntology' in specific reference to the specter of Marxism 'haunting' late 20th Century Europe, but the work has since been done to fully unpack this concept as a fundamental tendency of post-modern culture. This is particularly relevant in issues of memory and ideology. With hauntological analyses, simple narratives of binary goods and evils, lost 'golden ages' and childhood utopias are disrupted through the return of the cultural ghosts of a dead past. For me, the go-to text on hauntology has been provided by Adam Harper:

"As is often the case in Derrida's writing however, 'hauntology' is a concept that's arguably better suited to interpretation than strict definition. It can easily be linked to the general methodology of deconstruction Derrida pioneered – as metaphors, spectres, being neither one thing or the other, challenge basic binary oppositions like 'alive / dead', 'present / absent' and 'past / present' and so are 'deconstructive' in nature. Or they can be linked to the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan and Žižek – the spectres Derrida discusses conceivably residing in an area beyond the abilities of the Imaginary and the Symbolic to reflect and describe the Real. Here the haunting metaphor can be extended: traditionally, a spectre invades the present to redress a balance there, to warn the present concerning the future. Hauntological spectres come to bother us and our images from any zone of deficit lying between things as they were / are / will be and things as they are *thought* or *hoped* to have been / be / be in the future, thus history haunts (Marxist) ideology, and (Marxist) ideology haunts history; theory haunts practice and practice haunts theory, **Utopia haunts reality and reality haunts Utopia**, and so on. Art that permits a hauntological reading would facilitate this process of haunting."

In the work of *Guernica*, Togawa attempts a hauntological critique of Japanese national memory, based around a resurrection of nostalgic images of popular culture - images which are drawn from the imagined utopia around which post-war narratives of Japanese nationality have been built.

The historical period that *Guernica* re-imagines and re-presents is hugely significant because it is vital to modern narratives of Japanese national identity. These narratives present the post-war Showa period as the story of the triumph of a freshly 'purified' Japanese democratic modernity over the evils of wartime militarism and American occupation – a triumph vindicated by the 'economic miracle' of the 1970s and '80s (Ivy 1995, p. 15). Historians of Japan have since carefully documented the traumatic realities of this process of post-war nation-building. This was a process which sought to re-legitimise the capitalist nationalism of militarist period and which took place alongside the spread and intensification of commodity relations within Japanese society (Doak 2007, p. 203; McVeigh 2004, pp. 109-110). Necessarily, this process required the Japanese state to suppress dissenting narratives through institutional (education) and cultural (propaganda) means. These subaltern narratives included socialist ones which noted that the post-war state continued to embody the fascism of the preceding regime, ethnic minority narratives which were

lost in the need to form a state that maintained a myth of ethnic homogeneity, and feminist narratives which protested the role of women as 'mothers of the nation' in the 'new' state.

Thus the formation of the post-war ideology of democratic capitalist nationalism was carried out through the ideological territorialisation of the diverse post-war experiences of the Japanese into a clear binary narrative of good overcoming evil. The legacy of these traumas (particularly those associated with the continuities between pre-war and post-war Japan) have never been fully addressed, and Marilyn Ivy (1995 p. 15-17) argues they were rather suppressed "through the displacement of memories in the routines of overwork." Guernica's success, then, lay in the fact that they re-staged these displaced memories under the guise of kitsch nostalgia – an act of *Rewriting History* (which was the title of a later DVD collection of Guernica's live shows).

The musical and visual references to German culture are also problematising as, both because inter-war Germany presents a classically hauntological situation of an idealised past haunted by our retrospective knowledge of a disturbing historical reality, and because such references highlight the uneasy influence that German notions of nationality have historically exerted over Japanese nationalism (see Buruma 1994, pp. 7-10).

VIDEO: *Guernica* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKPKmAF6xG8>

To understand why Togawa decided to examine these issues in the early 1980s, we must consider the wider historical context of this period. Issues of Japanese national identity and memory of the recent past were becoming increasingly foregrounded in popular consciousness as Japan plunged into post-modernity, and the declining health of Hirohito made it increasingly clear that the Shōwa period was drawing to a close. The 1982 textbook controversy and the popular media's sensationist despair at the state of the nation are symptomatic of this turn.

After 1982 Togawa's focus returned to her solo work, which increasingly emulated and parodied mainstream *aidoru* pop. However, many of her subsequent albums maintained a hauntological element, most strongly evident in sinister electronic adaptations of traditional folk music, mirroring a broader resurgence in interest in the 'ghosts' of Japan's pre-modern past.

### ***Aidoru*-Pop and Détournement**

The rise of industrially produced *aidoru* pop music, and the ascendancy of the celebrity *aidoru* who performed it was one of the most striking aspects of Japanese popular culture in the '80s. In examining this cultural phenomenon I have drawn chiefly on Hiroshi Aoyagi's exhaustive study of *aidoru* music and the industry that produces it, *Islands of Eight Million Smiles* (2005). In this study he carefully documents the vast influence and popularity of *aidoru* music and celebrities on Japanese adolescent cultures from the '80s onwards, viewing the symbolic purity of *aidoru* and ritualistic devotion that their fans gave them as analogous to religious practices. Despite this attention to detail, Aoyagi shows little interest in the music performed by *aidoru*, treating it as little more than irrelevant, Westernised, commercial pop-music – a blank canvas upon which the symbolic framing of *aidoru* as purified symbols of ideal femininity can be projected. Yet it was exactly this genre that Togawa turned her attention to in the mid-'80s, producing several of albums of upbeat, contemporary and compelling pop music.

Here we find Togawa projecting a far more commercially acceptable image as she sings *Yumemiru Yakusoku* (Dreams of Promises). Incidentally, this is my favourite of Togawa's 'straight'

pop songs, partly because the chorus rhymes *pikunikku* (picnic) with *puratonikku* (platonic). Sadly, the video I originally found of her performing this song on a light entertainment show with a very pedestrian feel to it has been deleted, so we have to settle for this version of the song on its own.

VIDEO: *Jun Togawa - Yumemiru Yakusoku*

Whilst such 'commercial' pop music is aesthetically distant from the deeply anti-'popular' music Togawa produced with Guernica, similar themes are evident. If Guernica problematised and subverted the territorialising narrative of 'nation-construction', Togawa's *aidoru*-pop did the same to the territorialising process of 'self-construction' that the mainstream pop industry promoted. The comparison is not as far fetched as it may seem. In Aoyagi's study he emphasises the territorialising function of the industry and its musical products on the self, particularly amongst adolescent women:

"The idol-manufacturing industry absorbs young people into its system of production, molds their selves into marketable personalities, commercializes their images for the masses, and contributes to the ongoing construction of ideal images of adolescent selfhood. This capitalization process is commercial, social and cultural at the same time." (2005, p. 3)

VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAz-CKhLbjQ>

Aoyagi conceives of the industry as a Foucauldian exercise in regulatory power, territorialising the bodies and images of young performers into capitalised symbols, which are then used to project ideals of femininity and obedience to which adolescent selves should aspire – the very purpose of the existence of *aidoru* being "to socialise young personalities". This is clearly analogous to the longstanding practices of Japanese state and educational institutions in actively socialising young women into traditionally feminine sexual/domestic roles, as recorded by Brian J. McVeigh (2004, p. 219-221).



I regard Togawa's parodic approach to *aidoru*-pop, then, as a problematisation of these gender roles, placing it in a longstanding Japanese tradition of exploring gender in cultural performances (as exemplified by the Takarazuka Revue). However, Togawa's music went beyond mere parody and gender 'experimentation', and adopted a more provocative, ironic stance, best described as *détournement*.

This act of *détournement* is perfectly demonstrated by Togawa's juxtaposition of upbeat pop tunes with dark lyrics that dealt with sex, menstruation, child abuse, nihilism, violence, and

frequently drew on disturbing imagery of body morphing. In particular, Togawa's lyrics repeatedly treat her own body as 'insect-like' (in songs such as *Pupae Woman* and *Swarms of Insects*), or as distorted into robotic, quasi-human forms. This ties into a simultaneous trend of Japanese popular culture to focus on the cybernetic augmentation of the body, a trend which (as far as I know) has not yet been written about. In Togawa's case, I get the sense that these descriptions of the destruction and reconfiguration of her body relate to puberty, which she re-imagines as a hideous process of physical distortion. In one song, she describes love as a 'mutation' of her body—an acknowledgment of the inherent violence of the power relations of romantic love. In these powerful metaphors, she also highlights and subverts the objectification and territorialisation of the female body that the *aidoru* archetype is built upon. Whilst other *aidoru* produced glossy photo albums of themselves dressed as various feminine archetypes (schoolgirl, geisha, etc.), Togawa released a similar collection of photos with the English title JUN TOGAWA AS ONLY A LUMP OF MEAT. This imagery is continued in her videos and stage performances, where she often appeared wearing dragon-fly wings or 'robotic' attachments to her limbs. In interviews, Togawa has stated that her fascination with insects was prompted by a childhood visit to Meguro Parasitological Museum, and that she has felt a strong attraction and identification with creatures other people have been disgusted by ever since:

"Now I know why I have been so strongly attracted to parasites and worms. It's a feeling of the continuity of life. I feel there is a basic continuity between humans and these creatures. I might even call this feeling "love." Humans and other creatures are not as different as they look."



Japanese feminism in the late 20th Century has increasingly focused on how the tensions of gender inequality are physically inscribed on the bodies of women (Mackie 2003, pp. 212-213), and I regard Togawa's approach to the body as a continuation of this trend, a *détournement* of the regimentation and idealised presentation of the female body by the *aidoru* industry. One of her most successful songs was *Tamahime-sama*, which Togawa performed on several TV shows whilst wearing insect wings and dancing in an un-hinged, decidedly 'un-feminine' way. The lyrics clearly refer to menstruation, and her whole performance can be regarded as an aggressive de-

territorialisation of the idealised gender archetypes promoted by the *aidoru* industry:

*On the night of the red moon, inside the private jail,  
Tamahime-sama's seizures continue.*

*[...]*

*The flow of blood is unstoppable,  
Her brain moves to her uterus,  
With the destructive force of 100,000 horse power.*

Elsewhere, her lyrics present romance as a violent conflict which (like the *aidoru* industry itself) inscribes its violent territorialisation on the female body, as in the chorus to the single Suki Suki Daiksuki (which is otherwise a perfectly optimistic and upbeat *aidoru*-pop song):

*KISS ME*

*Like a punch as blood stains my lip!*

*HOLD ME*

*As my ribs are breaking!*

*I love you so much! (x3)*

*Say you love me or I'll kill you!*

(The capitalised lyrics are sung in English, mimicking *aidoru*-pop's anglophonic tendencies.)

Beyond the *aidoru* industry, Togawa's détournement of presentations of gender can be seen as a wider attack on gendered roles in Japanese society as a whole. Here it is useful to introduce the notion of gender roles as 'performative', being constructed and reinforced by individual performances. Japanese feminism has understood Japanese notions of femininity as being chiefly constituted by the requirement to perform as 'good wives - wise mothers', a role which has been actively taught by state and educational institutions as a form of gendered nationalism. Aoyagi argues that while the presentation of femininity as 'cute' by *aidoru* and their fans represented an escape from this dichotomy, it was nonetheless an equally oppressive and sexualised gender role. The archetypal symbol of this cute femininity in the '80s was the schoolgirl, a costume which Togawa occasionally wore on stage. Ryang has described extensively the oppressive aspects of the schoolgirl archetype, as a sexualised symbol of the female body incorporated into nationalised state apparatus – the mobilisation of sexuality and femininity as national duty. Thus Togawa's presentation of herself as a schoolgirl performing such 'un-feminine' and subversive songs can be regarded as a détournement of a wider gender stereotype. Indeed, contained within the archetype of 'good wife – wise mother' is an inherent contradiction (as identified by Mitsu Tanaka (see Mackie 2002, p. 144)): that Japanese women are required to simultaneously perform in multiple, contradictory, sexual-domestic roles.

*VIDEO: Jun Togawa Live*

I regard this 'schizophrenic' tendency of Japanese femininity as something Jun Togawa addresses through the schizophrenic aesthetic of her work. Whilst it is common for Japanese pop stars to attempt a wide range of styles as a demonstration of their abilities, the vast range of genres and voices Togawa adopts on each album achieves an entirely different effect, not least because so many of her vocal performances are deliberately un-hinged and off-pitch. As several critics have commented, Togawa immerses herself so completely in each song, and uses such varied vocal and musical styles, that the overwhelming impression for the listener is that they are



eavesdropping upon a tangle of multiple personalities competing for space. For example, on the 1985 album *Kyokuto Ian Shoka* Togawa juxtaposes upbeat J-Pop, school marching songs, electro-folk, melancholy enka, avant-garde electronica and operatic ballads.

This schizophrenia is perhaps most effectively employed in Togawa's video for *Suki Suki Daisuki*, which sees her modelling herself into a series of Japanese feminine archetypes. As the song ends and the peppy chorus of 'Suki suki daisuki' ('I love you so much') loops into eternity Togawa transforms herself: sexualised aidoru, fickle child hanging on the arm of a faceless older man, stern Noh actress, shy schoolgirl, cross-dressing Takarazuka performer, blushing nurse, aloof fashionista. Each character carefully mouths 'daisuki' to camera (some with tenderness, some with aggression) as the dull repetition drains the life and individuality from the images. As Togawa transforms herself into a series of signs of femininity, their proximity to one another alerts us to their monotony: they all require an identical performance. She renders herself as the concrete manifestation of the schizophrenia of femininity and in doing so radically destabilises it, a détournement that is completed by the final image in the video: Togawa appears without makeup, her hair unkempt, her expression uneasy, performing the role of herself.

*VIDEO: Jun Togawa – Sukisukidaisuke*

If we are to assess how far Jun Togawa was successful in disrupting dominant narratives of memory and gender, we must balance an appreciation of the critical power of her work with an acknowledgement that it never achieved wide distribution, despite the moderate success of several singles in the mid-'80s. Equally, we must acknowledge that cultural performance is perhaps not the most effective sphere from which to challenge such narratives, since it has increasingly become a site in which dissent is tolerated – an environment in which gender roles can be 'safely' experimented with – which robs Togawa's work of some of its subversive potential. Nonetheless, Togawa's work received far wider distribution than other comparable Avant Garde artists, precisely because it adopts and subtly subverts 'mainstream' cultural currents of nostalgia and aidoru pop. The very success of Togawa's work lies in the fact that its disruption of dominant narratives – through hauntology and détournement – ironically reclaims the cultural forms it attacks.

## **Bibliography**

1-5, 'Jun Togawa', *JMusic Ignited*, (July 2010), available at: <http://jmignited.com/artists1/62-jpop/496-jun-togawa> (accessed 12/11/2010).

Aoyagi, Hiroshi, *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Reproduction in Contemporary Japan*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

Buruma, Ian, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*, (Jonathan Cape: London, 1994).

Clammer, John, 'Received Dreams: Consumer Capitalism, Social Process, and the Management of the Emotions in Contemporary Japan', in *Globalization and Social Change in Contemporary Japan*, ed. J.S. Eades, Tom Gill, Harumi Befu, (Trans Pacific Press: Melbourne, 2000), pp. 203-223.

Derrida, Jacques, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (Routledge: New York, 1994).

Doak, Kevin M., *A History of Nationalism in Modern Japan: Placing the people*, (Brill: Leiden, 2007).

Frühstück, Sabine, *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan*, (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2003).

Harper, Adam, 'Hauntology: The past inside the present', *Rouge's Foam*, (October 2009), available at: <http://rougesfoam.blogspot.com/2009/10/hauntology-past-inside-present.html> (accessed 26/10/2010).

Ivy, Marilyn, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1995).

Jay, 'Everything you wanted to know about Jun Togawa (but were afraid to ask)', *What Fucked You?*, (April 2009), available at: [http://whatfuckedyou.blogspot.com/2009\\_04\\_01\\_archive.html](http://whatfuckedyou.blogspot.com/2009_04_01_archive.html) (accessed 27/10/2010)

Kent, Nicholas D., *Jun Togawa, Guernica, Yapoos, Koji Ueno, Yoichiro Yoshikawa*, (2001), available at: <http://www.artskool.biz/jem/jt.html> (accessed 27/10/2010).

Mackie, Vera, *Feminism in Modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment and Sexuality*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003).

McVeigh, Brian J., *Nationalisms of Japan : Managing and Mystifying Identity*, (Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, Maryland, 2004).

Mihalopoulos, Bill, 'Becoming Insects: Imamura Shōhei and the Entomology of Modernity', in *The Power of Memory in Modern Japan*, ed. Sven Saaler, Wolfgang Schwentker, (Global Oriental: Folkestone, 2008), pp. 277-290.

Momus, 'Concerning the brilliance of Jun Togawa', *Click Opera*, (March 2008), available at <http://imomus.livejournal.com/362343.html> (accessed 27/10/2010).

Nozaki, Yoshiko, *War Memory, Nationalism and Education in Postwar Japan, 1945-2007: The Japanese history textbook controversy and Ienaga Saburo's court challenges*, (Routledge: New York,

2008).

O-Maru, 'JUN TOGAWA AS ONLY A LUMP OF MEAT'(05)', , (September 2006), available at: [http://futakin.txt-nifty.com/blog/2006/09/\\_jun\\_togawa\\_as\\_\\_d0a6.html](http://futakin.txt-nifty.com/blog/2006/09/_jun_togawa_as__d0a6.html) (accessed 27/10/2010).

Robertson, Jennifer, *Takarazuka: sexual politics and popular culture in modern Japan*, (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1998).

Rozmarin, Miri, 'Power, Freedom and Sexuality: Foucault and Sexual Difference', *Human Studies*, Vol. 28, no. 1 (2005), pp. 1-14.

Ryang, Sonia, *Love in Modern Japan: Its estrangement from self, sex and society*, (Routledge: London, 2006).

Saeki, Chiruzu, *U.S. cultural propaganda in cold war Japan : promoting democracy 1948-1960*, (Edwin Mellen Press: Lewiston, New York, 2008).

Yaosyu, 'Life as a parasite? Interview with Jun Togawa', *Yaosyu*, (June 2008), available at <http://hi.baidu.com/yaosyu/blog/item/cba39f4a22c88a2609f7ef90.html> (accessed 27/10/2010).